# New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1955

Volume XVI, Number 4 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of February 14, 1955

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1955 PRODUCTIONS

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"The Desperate Hours"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of February 14, 1955*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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# "The Desperate Hours"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 11, 1955

## 'Desperate Hours' Sets Nerves Atingle

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Desperate Hours", is a melodrama that frankly sets out to pulverize your nerves. Before it is over, it does just that. And it also does the same thing to the nerves of most of its characters.

In this Barrymore Theater presentation Joseph Hayes has played a variation on a classic thriller theme. Three escaped criminals sneak into the quiet home of an innocent family and set up a siege.

The parents are unable to move for fear of what will happen to the children. Only the very young son puts adventure before caution. He repeatedly endangers the lives of the whole family with his fine intentions.

The father and daughter go to work. The appearance of normal life is held out to the world. The mother goes through the tortures of the damned as she watches her husband begin to revolt.

The unbearable situation is cracked when the youngest invader deserts. The police move near when another of them murders the trash man. In the end there are a couple of swift sequences that take your breath away with sinister invention and lightning shock.

Mr. Hayes has already published a novel of this tale. Highly successful, it reads like a moving picture scenario, and has been screened for future consumption.

The play is the closest thing ever attempted to putting a movie on the stage. The setting shows a four-room house, an exterior, and rooms in two other buildings. Curtains and lights block off the view as the action moves at a wild rate about the set.

Karl Malden has the central role of the father and rises to effective dramatic heights as his predicament maddens him.

Nancy Coleman is his wife. Her control is fascinating as she wavers from subdued hysterics to careful judgment to desperate defiance.

The most flamboyant of the criminals is a complex role played by Paul Newman. This is a real mental case, taking his hatred of his own father out on the world. Newman has exciting passages despite the fact that he tips the character's derangement much too early.

James Gregory is the stalwart, stubborn sheriff who knows the killer is out to get him. George Mathews plays the most moronic of the convicts. George Grizzard is effective as the young deserter, who inspires a paternal emotion in his maddened brother.

Robert Montgomery has staged the show at a sprint. Howard Bay makes the intricate set look normally domestic. "The Desperate Hours" is a whirlwind melodrama, with no time for breath or wonder.

"THE DESPERATE HOURS"

Play by Joseph Hayes, based on his novel of the same name; staged by Robert Montgomery; setting and lighting by Howard Bay; costumes by Robert Randolph; presented by Howard Erskine and Mr. Hayes at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, February 10, 1955. The cast:

Tom Winston.....Judson Pratt
Jesse Bard.....James Gregory
Harry Carson.....Kendall Clark
Eleanor Hilliard..Nancy Coleman
Ralphie Hilliard.....
Malcolm Brodrick
Dan Hilliard.....Karl Malden
Cindy Hilliard..Patricia Peardon
Glenn Griffin.....Paul Newman
Hank Griffin...George Grizzard
Robish.....George Mathews
Chuck Wright.....Fred Eisley
Mr. Patterson....Wyrley Birch
Lt. Carl Fredericks..Rusty Lane
Miss Swift.....Mary Orr

Daily Mirror

February 11, 1955

## 'Desperate Hours' Proves To Be Bang-Bang Hit

By ROBERT COLEMAN

This is the saga of a game guy who got up off the floor after a knockdown to score a knockout. Several years ago, Joseph Hayes penned a play called "Leaf and Bough." Directorial, scenic and other mishaps brought it some razoos. Which it didn't deserve. For it had a goodly measure of merit, and promised much for the young author in the future.

**TAKING THE RAPS** in stride, Hayes wrote a best seller called "The Desperate Hours." Then he dramatized it, and decided to produce it in association with Howard Erskine. It arrived at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre Thursday evening, and pulled the first-nighters forward to the edges of their seats.

**"The Desperate Hours" is a terrific psychological thriller. It has to do with three thugs who escape from a penitentiary and terrorize a decent household for hours. You may wonder why agents of the law didn't come to their rescue. Well, they tried to. And that's what gives the new arrival its tension, suspense and wallop.**

"The Desperate Hours" is the most absorbing chiller-diller of its kind to hit Broadway since "Blind Alley." It has some rough edges. It sacrifices subtlety for vitality. It has to forego some psychological implications in favor of direct action. But the result is a bang-bang hit!

**UNDER ROBERT** Montgomery's vigorous direction, it's played to the hilt. Nancy Coleman—believe us, there's no nepotism here—brings wonderful emotional impact and great heart to the role of the mother frightened for her family. Why this admirable actress hasn't been seen hereabouts recently in a part worthy of her talents is a mystery to us.

**Karl Malden, a really superior actor, etches a fitting companion piece as the harassed father, a little man who becomes a big one when the chips are down. James Gregory, who has few peers in character assignments, is excellent, as usual, as a hard-boiled but sympathetic deputy sheriff.**

Paul Newman, with but one previous Main Stem appearance is fascinating as the mastermind of the escapees who wilts under pressure. Salutes are also due George Mathews, Kendall Clark, Patricia Peardon, Rusty Lane, George Grizzard, Malcolm Brodrick and Mary Orr.

**HOWARD BAY HAS** designed an ingenious setting which permits quick changes and fluidity of movement.

**A young confrere asked us not so long ago why so much of the excitement had gone out of our theatre. We could only reply, offhand that it was because the drama had been drawn too fine. Authors and actors had become afraid of wearing their emotions on their sleeves. Well, this thriller packs plenty of excitement.**

Seldom have we seen an audience so spellbound in recent semesters as was that in the Ethel Barrymore Thursday evening. The first-nighters were rolling with the punches, rooting for the heroes and almost leaping on stage to clutch the throats of the villains. There were audible gasps and groans during the tense moments. It was evident that rousing theatre, good old-fashioned theatre, had come back to Broadway.

The New York Times

February 11, 1955

## *Theatre: The Guests Came From Jail*

### Family Is Held Captive in 'Desperate Hours'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ADD to the current stock of literate thrillers "The Desperate Hours," which opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre last evening.

It is a cops-and-jailbirds yarn by Joseph Hayes, who wrote it first in the shape of a taut novel. It is also a movie, though not to be released until next year; and a decade from now it will be a musical drama with a brassy orchestration and a symbolic ballet.

For Mr. Hayes has written a graphic crime play that makes sense. Three criminals who have broken out of jail take temporary refuge in the pleasant home of Mr. and Mrs. Hilliard, parents of a likable small boy and an attractive young lady in her teens. The criminals propose to stay there until one of their confederates sends them a package of escape-money.

That is the situation. It is a vivid one. For Mr. Hayes has ingeniously contrived the excitements of the conventional chase. To tell the truth, the cops, who keep turning up in

small scenes to one side of the stage, are not particularly inspiring. They talk a mechanical jargon with cynical inflections; now and then they scream at each other with nerves. As versions of Superman, they look and sound bogus.

But probably that is a virtue in a crime play, or, at least, a noble convention. And there is no doubt that Mr. Hayes has handled the situation inside the house with great skill. The tension is terrific. The unequal warfare between the helpless Hilliards and their monstrous guests, the moments of crisis when the outside world almost penetrates through the door or the telephone, the swift changes of mastery from one thing to another, the use of the children as hostages and the solution that releases all the Hilliards—all this is told with pace, economy and precision.

Theatregoers who remember Mr. Hayes' poetic "Leaf and Bough" from 1949 know that he is not only a craftsman but a writer. Let's not pretend that "The Desperate Hours" is a work of art like Dostoevsky. But it does show more interest in the characters than most thrillers do. The Hilliards are people of courage and pride. Their home represents to them an ideal of living. Apart from the terror of being threatened with guns, they feel that the privacy of their home has been violated. Theatregoers who are not scared to death may enjoy the spectacle of Mr. Hilliard rising to the occasion in defense of his family. Like a genuine writer, Mr. Hayes is interested in the inner life of his people.

For better or worse, this is the sort of play the New York theatre believes in and produces well. Howard Bay has designed a brilliant set for it—upstairs and downstairs skeletonized, with a glimpse of the shrubbery by the back door. Robert Montgomery has directed a terse, nerve-racking performance.

As the Hilliard parents, Karl Malden and Nancy Coleman are admirable. The trapped though unyielding husband, the distraught though affectionate wife make a splendid human combination. There is a pert daughter with a mind of her own by Patricia Peardon, full of character as well as impudence; and there is an attractive, cool-headed boy by Malcolm Brodrick.

Paul Newman plays the boss thug with a wildness that one is inclined to respect. George Grizzard and George Mathews are forbidding in minor respects as the less-intellectual footpads. James Gregory, Kendall Clark and Judson Pratt represent the law.

"Fraught with interest," as Peter Arno once remarked in the understatement of the year in a New Yorker drawing. "The Desperate Hours" shatters the nerves.

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# New York Post

February 11, 1955

## By Richard Watts Jr.

## Arrival of an Excellent Thriller

Advance reports about coming Broadway offerings can be highly misleading, but the enthusiastic out-of-town accounts that preceded the arrival of "The Desperate Hours" last night happily turned out to be entirely justified. At the Ethel Barrymore Theater, where it had its first local performance, Joseph Hayes' adaptation of his own successful novel proved to be that greatly prized theatrical commodity, a powerful and exciting suspense melodrama, every bit as pleasantly spine-tingling as the excellent work from which it stemmed.

What sets "The Desperate Hours" beyond the average example of its school of the suspenseful thriller is, as was true in the case of the novel, the attractive humanity of its sympathetic characters and the believable quality of their simple heroism. The nice Hilliard family, into whose home a trio of homicidal escaped convicts descends, is made up of such understandable everyday people that an audience can accept them as authentic human beings and share their terrors and their agonies in a fashion rare in frank and unashamed melodramas.

**Good Neighbors**

In fact, "The Desperate Hours" is something a little more than a play to be enjoyed for its thrills and its atmosphere of menace. In a fortunately unostentatious manner, wisely without pretensions, it manages to be a cheering and credible little tribute to the potential courage of decent average people pushed too far. Despite its murderous and pathological villains, and their sinister activities, Mr. Hayes' drama makes you feel pretty good about people and enables you to regard the sorely harried Mr. Hilliard as both a neighbor and a hero.

The thrills, however, are certainly there. From the time when the three fleeing convicts take over the Hilliard household until the final moment when an ending I won't try to tell you about takes place, the new play manages to keep its taut suspense going almost without an interruption of its terror. I have a slight suspicion that there are occasions in the course of the evening when the action threatens to get a trifle out of hand, but such occasions are few and never seriously interfere with the mounting menace of the melodrama.

**Efficient Job**

Mr. Hayes' play is not one to waste its time on side issues. Going about its business with notable efficiency, it proceeds to get those three convicts into the Hilliard home and keeps them there frighteningly until they finally leave, in one manner or another, and there is no nonsense about it. If such matters as the attitude of the police toward criminals are mentioned in passing, they assume their proper place in the pattern of the story, and, within its accepted limits, the result is a thriller with brains and a heart.

It is vitally important that the head of the family should be a believably sympathetic figure, and here it is extremely fortunate that such a splendid actor as Karl Malden has the role. Always an exceptional performer, Mr. Malden has never been in better form. I particularly liked the incisive James Gregory as a ruthless but understanding deputy sheriff. The three intruders are ably played by Paul Newman, George Mathews and George Grizzard, while Nancy Coleman, Patricia Peardon and young Malcolm Brodrick are effective as the other Hilliards. Howard Bay's interesting set is of great help. "The Desperate Hours" is a thriller as it should be.

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# New York Herald Tribune

February 11, 1955

THEATER

## *'The Desperate Hours'*

By WALTER F. KERR

***Suburban Jungle***

AS SLAM-BANG melodrama, with a glowering figure behind every door and a nervous finger on every trigger, "The Desperate Hours" is a beaut. Joseph Hayes has made a lightning-paced thriller out of his novel about an ordinary household invaded by killers, and while the material isn't exactly new—a couple of films, "He Ran All the Way" and "Suddenly," come to mind—the author has worked out a dozen or so breath-taking twists on it.

Karl Malden, as a respectable business man who has walked up his own garden path a thousand times, walks up it one night to discover his wife and children helpless in the hands of a gang of escaped convicts. As Mr. Hayes has imagined this Indianapolis family, they are a sufficiently terrorized but extremely game and ingenious lot. By the end of the first act, Mr. Malden has succeeded in tricking the invaders smack out of the house—only to discover that his eleven-year-oid son, concocting a stubborn little ruse of his own, has fouled up the works and brought them all back in again.

Son Ralphie, played with a bland and deadpan confidence by Malcolm Broderick, is up to a good many other tricks—including smuggling a message to his school teacher in a composition book—before the breakneck evening is over. So are red-headed daughter Cindy (Patricia Peardon) and her Jaguar-driving boy friend (Fred Eisley). Indeed by the time the snarling thugs are rounded up at 11 o'clock the house is crawling with amateur and professional gunmen.

All of this has been sleekly and swiftly staged by Robert Montgomery on a double-decker set that allows the action to race from a narrow back stairway to the bedrooms and cubbyholes upstairs, then down again to a trim and tidy suburban living-room, and even away from the house to a local police station and a handy neighboring attic. The story swirls with a rifle-fire urgency over Howard Bay's inventive design, suitably trailed by some ingenious lighting-effects, and I think you'll find the life-and-death chase loaded with theatrical tension.

As anything more than blood-and-thunder shenanigans—as, say, a character comment on the nature of the average American family, or a gingerly examination of criminal psychology—"The Desperate Hours" is a bit on the primitive side. Mr. Hayes doesn't waste much time dwelling on the daily routine, or the day-to-day affections, of the Hilliard family—those bogey men are in the back door within the first ten or twelve minutes—but his gestures in the direction of domestic sentiment are never much better than sonny's snorted "Ain't love disgusting" or mother's warm eulogy of daddy, "What you did just now—that was a foolish and terrible and wonderful thing."

And the stabs at dissecting the brain of Glenn Griffin, killer and lout extraordinary, are confined to some hasty interjections about a father-complex, and to having the slack-jawed convict occasionally make a blurry identification of father Hilliard with his own sadistic parent.

There is an ounce or so of philosophical talk to the effect that "We've come a long way up out of the slime, but it still sticks to some of us," but most of the thriller's efforts to add a cubit to its stature linger at the magazine-bromide level. Fortunately, they aren't insistent enough to spoil a rousing bout with the good guys, the bad guys, and the